

EVERY WORD IS ON TRIAL

Six-Word Memoirs in the Classroom

Jane M. Saunders ■ Emily E. Smith

“I just don’t know what I want to say,” Robert, a student writer, complains in frustration as he takes his seat. “I haven’t done anything interesting my whole life, and now I need to write a memoir about it?” Prominent researchers and educators of writing (Buckner, 2005; Burke, 2003; Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 2001) acknowledge the challenge of engaging students in the writing process for the sake of expression and communication without limiting them to stale prompts or promoting written work through wheedling, begging, or bribery.

Like Robert, many students grapple with how to begin writing because they have seen few opportunities to write for purposes other than in preparation for standardized tests. Given that there are increasing venues to make writing public that extend beyond the school day, like ever-burgeoning online sources and social media sites, it seems necessary that we reaffirm our commitment to helping students find their voices through writing for different purposes and for a diverse readership that will no doubt redouble at the same rate as our technological advances in coming years.

Concerned that many of her students were wary of writing because earlier experiences focused on dull topics that were then put away into a folder upon completion, never to be seen again, fifth-grade teacher and graduate student Emily Smith sought a more engaging way to introduce writing in her language arts class. For this, she turned to writing six-word memoirs with students to

promote writing for the sake of expression, to reinforce the tenets of the writing process, and to engage students in the authentic use of technology in her fifth-grade literacy classroom, culminating in published work on the class blog.

What follows is an introduction to six-word memoirs, for those unfamiliar with the form, and a description of steps Smith took to develop student work from words on the page to a more vivid form.

A Brief History of Six-Word Memoirs

The six-word memoir is a relatively new phenomenon. Based in part on a short piece attributed to Ernest Hemingway (“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”), the editors of *SMITH Magazine Online* (<http://www.smithmag.net/sixwords/>) posed a contest for writers: summarize your life story in six words. After a flood of entries, the editors drew from among their favorites to produce a book entitled *Not Quite What I Was Planning* (Fershleiser & Smith, 2008).

Since the initial contest, the website has become a clearinghouse of memoirs, including a section for teens, one for advice, and yet another that poses questions readers and writers share

Jane M. Saunders is an assistant professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas; e-mail janesaunders@txstate.edu.

Emily E. Smith is a fifth-grade language arts teacher at Cunningham Elementary School in Austin, Texas; e-mail smith.emilyelizabeth@gmail.com.

with the world. Their work is the subject of a short piece in *The New Yorker* (Widdicombe, 2008) and has captured the interest of a wide swatch of media figures from Stephen Colbert, who writes “Well, I thought it was funny,” to Oprah Winfrey, who has gotten on board with this style of memoir in her eponymous magazine (<http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Six-Word-Memoirs-O-Magazine-Mini-Memoirs>).

Readers should not let the brevity of the assignment mislead them into thinking six-word memoirs are a simple task; selecting words that speak with precision to your topic is more challenging than it might seem.

Employing Six-Word Memoirs as a Teaching Tool

Smith started thinking about how to use the six-word memoir assignment with her elementary-aged students after writing one for a class. She saw the assignment as a concrete way to guide students through the writing process, from generating an idea to its final form, making their work public. Because Smith planned to use the six-word memoir as an opening activity near the beginning of the school year, she said she hoped her six-word memoir assignment could help students “in terms of defining who they were as individuals” and to consider how these attributes “affected the community around them” as they learned and grew throughout the school year. She saw the six-word memoirs as a means to publish student work as quickly into the school year as possible on the class blog, so that students could see she valued their efforts.

Step One: Mentor Texts and Explanations of Six-Word Memoirs

There are a variety of ways to guide students in writing six-word

memoirs. It can sometimes help to draw on models. A recent article about pairing images with six-word memoirs offers student-generated examples that teachers might use to help students develop ideas (<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/01/09/six-word-memoirs-students/>). It also helps to offer students guidance about the form so that their memoirs make sense.

For example, a short six-word sentence is typically more meaningful than a list of six words that do not form a complete thought. Asking students to select an adjective or two that describes them and then developing that into a short phrase can yield far more precise memoirs than might writing a sentence about their day.

To help model the structure and purpose of the six-word memoir, Smith spends time exploring the *SMITH Magazine* website with students, seeking examples to serve as mentor texts for their writing. Students then view a Prezi presentation that offers models of six-word memoirs paired with images that correspond with the topics (http://prezi.com/prf6w_zjbpz4/6-word-memoir/?auth_key=ae105e0237b1550dd58956a744f4ab735c28e59e). Knowing she will ask students to make similar pairings, Smith uses this Prezi to generate buzz about the project and get students excited about writing.

Step Two: The Importance of Word Choice

Much of our time as writing teachers is spent helping students elaborate on skeletal sentences or paragraphs and develop imagery or voice. Six-word memoirs ask authors to use precision in their word choices and to omit the extraneous

or unnecessary. By asking students “What defines you right now, at this particular moment in your life?” you are helping them take a snapshot and, through words, create an image in time. Students can then winnow down that portrait until it contains the most important six words needed to convey their message.

In addition to viewing the *SMITH Magazine* website and looking at other examples of six-word memoirs, Smith talks with students about words: “Initially, I was worried students would just list adjectives, and wanted them instead to develop creative sentences reflective of who they were. I wanted them to be mindful of their words,” something she believed students had not thought much about in earlier grades. Students talk about how the website images help them understand a particular memoir. For example, the image of a door juxtaposed with the memoir “Things are better when he’s gone” (see Figure 1) aid students in blending literal and metaphorical meanings.

Developing students’ skills in inferring meaning is especially

Pause and Ponder

- What are some ways for teachers to practice the writing process steps early in the year with a short piece of writing?
- How might teachers incorporate technology to aid in publishing student work online?
- How can educators generate excitement about writing, using technology, and photography?

Figure 1 Six-Word Memoir: When He's Gone



important to Smith. By asking students to analyze memoirs, she is also asking them to engage in reading between the lines (and images) to elicit meaning, a skill that she will reinforce in literature circles and other in-class activities as the year progresses.

Step Three: Engaging in the Writing Process—Every Word Is on Trial

When asking students to write any type of memoir, we have to help them contain the topic. Otherwise, students can create autobiographies that lack focus, theme, or a message. Assigning six-word memoirs can seem intimidating to students used to having as much space as they need to explain their story, so it is important to focus on clarity in the revision process.

To help focus her students' efforts, Smith asks students to consider "Life as a Fifth-Grader" while they develop

their six-word memoirs. She hopes to capture something influential in their lives, their fears, or their levels of excitement about going into the fifth grade through this assignment. Students are guided through writer's workshop (Ray, 2004) with Smith reminding them, "Every word is on trial, so choose wisely."

She asks students to work in pairs to generate as many ideas as possible and mine them for words to closely express their thinking. Smith tries to reinforce from the start of the school year the notion that students must rely on each other to refine their work. She acknowledges, "I want

students to know I am not the only author in the room." She also reminds students that they are responsible for helping each other polish memoirs so that they include a tight and clear message.

Several students produce several memoirs in the time that others are getting started, and Smith has these students mentor other students who are struggling to develop ideas. Language learners are guided by fluent English speakers to select more precise words for their memoirs.

Step Four: Connecting Writing to Art

Through the power of the Internet and varied meme-building websites, teachers have ample exposure to the pairing of witticisms and images. Our students too are often engaged in meme-building—from Grumpy Cat to Success Kid—and these visuals paired with words are useful tools to help students generate ideas for ways they can use imagery to emphasize the point of their six-word memoir.

Smith asks students to engage in a "read-around" of their memoirs before forming small groups to brainstorm possible images to appropriately match the message. This blended text and imagery will serve as the final product published on the class blog. Using class computers and iPads, Smith introduces students to royalty-free images available on Flickr (www.flickr.com) to pair with their memoirs, helping students use

"Smith is able to set a tone for the school year: we share our work with others in this classroom."

visual cues to connect to text (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). She teaches students how to search for and save images to their student folders on class computers, employing those with more advanced technological skills to help others with less experience.

There is a buzz of conversation as students engage with Flickr images. Those with more confidence finding compelling images help classmates make appropriate pairings, save these images, and consider next steps in the process so that nobody falls behind in their work. This shared mentorship is cultivated and promoted by Smith, to reinforce that she is not the only teacher in the classroom.

Step Five: Superimposing Words Onto the Photographs

As noted earlier, students and teachers alike are well acquainted with the pairing of images and witty expressions. Beyond memes, there is a great deal of information graphic sharing occurring through social networking sites as well as e-mail, and these too can serve as indirect models while creating memoirs and selecting images. For the novice, though, it is still a complex task and one that requires scaffolding and practice.

Because Smith is committed to developing students' technological skills while strengthening their literacy chops, she requires that the final step in the six-word memoir process is to merge words and images. For this, Smith teaches students to use the online application Phixr (www.phixr.com). The application allows students to drag and drop images into a field and superimpose text on top of those images (see Figure 2).

Students can choose from a list of fonts and colors to enhance their words, and they can alter the placement of text

so that the memoir does not obscure the image. Students can then save and download their finished memoirs to class computers; later, Smith uses a flash drive to gather all of the final products and transfer student work to her computer.

Step Six: Publishing Students' Six-Word Memoirs Online

Because many of Smith's students do not have computers in their homes, one of the aspirations of Smith's class blog is to showcase student work and to

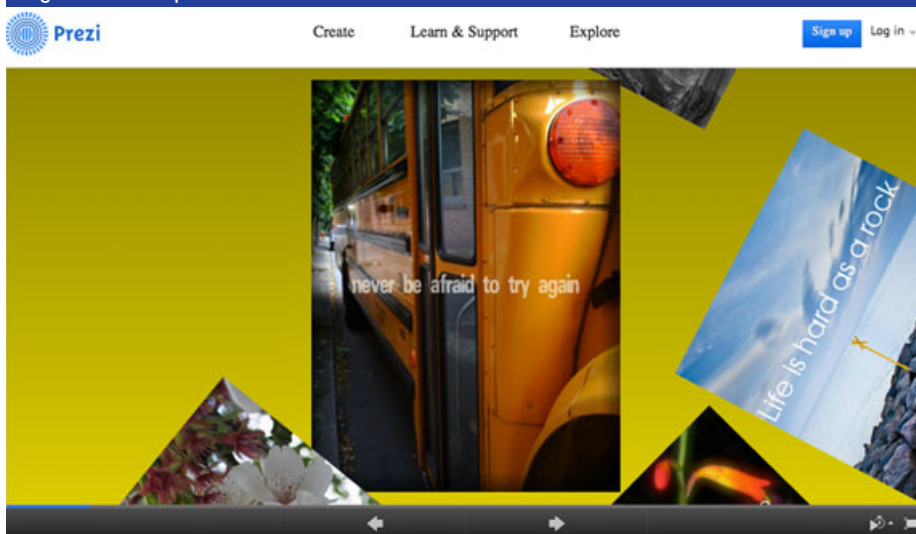
Figure 2 Six-Word Memoir: Parents



strengthen students' proficiency in using technology as a learning tool. Smith uses Prezi (<http://prezi.com/>) to publish student work in a way that makes it accessible to parents, students, and the local community. Prezi is a slide-show presentation tool, like PowerPoint, available to users who can access the Internet but do not own the Microsoft Office suite of tools. Students are excited to view the final versions of their work strung together in the Prezi presentation (see Figure 3) during an in-class viewing day.

They eat snacks, laugh at each other's memoirs, and marvel that their work will not lie fallow in a folder or drawer, forgotten over time. In years to come,

Figure 3 Samples of Student Work in Prezi



Digital 6-Word Memoirs

TAKE ACTION!

Step	Tools or Expertise
1. Explain the process of six-word memoirs to students.	Familiarity with six-word memoirs and examples for students to read or view
2. Model six-word memoirs using self-created examples or those found online.	The ability to help students understand inferencing and concrete and figurative meanings
3. Guide students through the writing process.	The ability to help students understand inferencing and concrete and figurative meanings
4. Help students connect their writing to art, images, or photographs.	Navigating Flickr to find images that are free to use from the Creative Commons; downloading and saving images from the Internet
5. Use technology to superimpose memoirs onto art, images, or photographs.	Knowledge about how to use online applications like Phixr, or asking technologically savvy students to aid in this process
6. Make student work public, transforming the six-word memoirs into a Prezi presentation.	Knowledge of how to upload student work into a Prezi presentation, PowerPoint presentation, slideshow, or short movie hosted by a class webpage or blog

Smith's future students will draw on this work as a mentor text to guide six-word memoirs of their own.

Reflecting on the Process

Both authors spend time looking through student work, noticing trends in the memoirs reflective of the concerns and preoccupations of Smith's pre-teen students. Table below highlights some of these.

As the year progresses, students revisit the six-word memoirs and reflect back on their earlier work. Some acknowledge they might have made too much of a situation; others use the memoirs as a starting point for a longer story that affords greater detail than six words allow. By using the six-word memoirs at the beginning of the school year, Smith is able to set a tone for the school year: *we share our work with others in this classroom*.

Beyond the benefit of practicing their skills in writing and harnessing technology, Smith's students read and respond to each other's work on the

class blog. This process yields additional engagement; for example, one student posts in the comments section, "i love our 6 word memoirs i saw mine on prezi and i didnt ever think that my writing would ever be on a website thanks ms. (Ms. Smith)." The

Table Topics and Trends in Students' Six-Word Memoirs

Topic	Six-Word Memoir	Image
Confessions	My life feels weird at school	spray painted school building
Confessions	Parents: wish they were still together	wedding rings
Advice	Never be afraid to try again	yellow school bus
Advice	No quitter [sic] is a real winner	medals
Burgeoning Confidence	I am smarter than last year	jacket, purse, hat
Burgeoning Confidence	I'm only a beginner in life	swaddled baby
Burgeoning Confidence	Need privacy but not too much	fence/open field of grass

memoirs extend beyond a getting-to-know-you activity at the beginning of the year, generating not just words and images but excitement about writing.

Six-word memoirs seem like a simple enough task, but Smith admits, “I think it’s more challenging than writing a paragraph about themselves—which my students have been asked to do many times. But to tell a story in only six words...that’s much more difficult, and something I revisit throughout the year.” What seems invaluable about this project is not just its lasting effect as a touchstone for literary conversations; the six-word memoir rather allows students to, as Calkins (1994) notes, begin with “something small” and see “significance emerge” on the page (p. 7). These tiny acts of significance can do wonders in cultivating confidence and

enthusiasm in students as they attempt more complex and demanding future literacy tasks.

Interested readers can use the following link to access the completed Prezi of students’ six-word memoirs, linked to Smith’s class blog: http://prezi.com/up4021lfqoge/digital-6-word-memoirs/?auth_key=7688da055538c57a4db50402028947c52f336c15

REFERENCES

- Buckner, A. (2005). *Notebook knowhow: Strategies for the writer's notebook*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Burke, J. (2003). *Writing reminders: Tools, tips, and techniques*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Fershleiser, R., & Smith, L. (2008). *Not quite what I was planning: Six-word memoirs by writers famous and obscure*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Fletcher, R. (2001). *Nonfiction craft lessons: Teaching information writing K–8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Harvey, S., & Daniels, H. (2009). *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Ray, K.W. (2004). Why Cauley writes well: A close look at what a difference good teaching can make. *Language Arts*, 82(2), 100–109.
- Widdicombe, L. (2008, February 5). Say it all in six words. *The New Yorker*.

MORE TO EXPLORE

For additional guidance in creating six-word memoirs with students, the authors found the following websites helpful:

- <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-power-language-with-30701.html>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18768430>
- <http://www.smithteens.com/>
- <http://educationcloset.com/2012/03/02/life-in-6-words/>